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ABSTRACT

Combing experienced teachers (i.e., teachers in graduate programs in reading or language arts) and preservice reading students in methods courses is not a new idea, but the practice is not prevalent. Most teacher preparation institutions still run the initial language arts and reading courses before student teaching and independent or input other than the instructor and the library. Largely the problem of combined programs lies in scheduling: evening sessions must be scheduled in order that the graduate students may attend. Preservice students, however, could begin classes in midafternoon; then the graduate students and teachers enrolled in reading programs could join together for a combined session. Afterwards, the experienced group could finish their evening course separately. The benefit of this combined session is a synthesis of practical realities and youthful expectations of what should be. (JB)

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by William D. Page

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TOWARD BETTER PREPARATION OF LANGUAGE ARTS AND READING TEACHERS

What can we do now to improve language arts and reading instruction? With the teaching field in a state of flux; and controversies about language, dialect, and accountability multiplying by the journal issue, it may seem like we have to wait until at least the major problems are solved. This attitude is prevalent but it is misleading. We really can do productive things that have immediate, valuable consequences. Based on this premise, this article offers one strong, immediately applicable, valid recommendation to those who prepare teachers of language arts and reading and it won't cost much.

The recommendation is to combine the experiences of graduate, part-time students in reading with pre-service, pre-student teaching education students. For the experienced teachers, a portion of a foundations of reading instruction course is a good time to initiate them to working with adults, a process that must be mastered by reading specialists. For the pre-service students, the ripe time is the initial introduction to methods and materials of language arts and reading instruction.

The interaction between these two groups creates advantages for both. The graduate reading students are in-service, experienced teachers, usually pursuing a part-time program. They can provide a background of information from their day to day teaching experiences. They inject a reality into the situation, directing the discussions and activities to relevant concerns.

The pre-service students are making their initial entry into the problems of language arts and reading instruction. They test their fresh viewpoints and provide a valuable form of unfettered idealism. It may be laced with optimism and hope. It may be couched in fear. A lively relevancy enters the scene as they interact with their experienced colleagues. Both groups benefit and course effectiveness is increased.

Background

Elementary language arts and reading teachers are widely criticized because of alledged inaptitude. At least some charges are misdirected. Colleges and universities that prepare teachers must shoulder much of the blame.

Because of high personnel turnover, a large portion of elementary school teachers are inexperienced in instruction except for college preparation. Student teaching helps, but not enough. New solutions to the problem are required for improvement of elementary language arts and reading instruction. The preparation of language arts and reading teachers warrants attention as a crucial point in the existing educational structure.

The idea of teacher-proof instructional materials has attracted attention, and may, someday, prove to be productive. The influence of materials on curriculum is well documented. However, the progress isn't fast enough. Aid to teaching is required now, and it is possible.

Criticisms of practices in preparing elementary language arts and reading teachers are revealing. High on the list are charges that university professors get too far from the reality of classrooms, and there is truth in this.

Long range attempts to improve instruction are valuable and should be pursued with vigor. This pursuit does not reduce the value of searching for immediate solutions to problems. Equally important are economic conditions accompanying proposed solutions. Surprisingly, the search for immediately applicable, economically feasible attacks upon language arts and reading instruction problems receives inadequate attention in today's world of long range performance contracts and and massive reorganization of basal readers, language text books, and systematic programs.

The recommendation to combine experienced and pre-service teachers in methods instruction is economically feasible and immediately applicable. This step can be taken by almost any teacher preparation institution in the United States today. A few conditions are required. The institution must have access to experienced teachers such as those of a graduate program in reading or language arts. It is preferable that the graduate program permits part-time study, insuring immediate, daily classroom experiences by the graduate teachers.

Given these two conditions, the proposal simply involves combining the experienced teacher graduate students with the pre-service, pre-student teaching elementary language

arts and reading students. The two groups function together and feed on each other's ideation. A few soluble problems are involved. A great many mutual benefits are derived.

Scheduling

Scheduling poses one problem. A commitment on the part of college instructors is required. That commitment must be strong enough to motivate the instructor to schedule evening classes permitting teaching graduate students to attend.

Time must be allocated in at least three categories. The pre-service, pre-student teaching students should be scheduled with a portion of time with the instructor and without the experienced teachers. A second time period is a joint session where the two groups meet together. The experienced teachers also require time with the instructor without the pre-service students. The independent group periods permit dealing with the unique purposes and problems of each group. The combined session creates a unique exposure for both groups. A period for free association of the two groups is desirable. Fifteen minutes of coffee-break time permits an informal exchange of ideas where the groups can use each other as resources to meet problems. A suggested three hour schedule is presented here.

Schedule

3:00 P.M. to 4:00 P.M. Pre-service, pre-student teaching language arts and reading students meet independently.

4:00 P.M. to 5:00 P.M. Experienced teachers enrolled in a graduate reading program join the pre-service students for the combined session. A 15 minute, informal coffee break is recommended to promote interaction between the groups.

5:00 P.M. to 6:00 P.M. Experienced teachers meet independently.

What the students think and do in these three sessions is crucial. Independent and combined sessions must be planned to deal with the appropriate problem areas. Leadership is a key feature of the role of the instructor. Cooperation must be elicited from both groups. Firm guidance and patient, judicious encouragement of individuals are required to bring forth valued input and interaction between the groups.

Combined Sessions

The pivotal time is the combined session. Information input meeting common needs of both groups must be provided in the combined sessions. The pre-service, pre-student teaching group needs include not only exposure to basic information, but an encounter with pedagogical techniques and knowledge at the frontiers of the field. Expectations of what really exists in schools today must be flanked with feasible viewpoints on what can and should be happening in schools.

Combined sessions provide input for experienced teachers also. Though they are teaching, several concurrent ends of the combined sessions should be entertained for the experienced graduate students. An organized review of existing resources is bound to fill inevitable gaps in previous education. Bringing the experienced teachers up to date on late findings, new materials, and new techniques is warranted. Pushing their thinking to the frontier, and past it to creative possibilities rounds out the combined session input.

Another benefit of the combined sessions accrues to the experienced teachers. The ends of a graduate reading specialty student usually include helping teachers in school settings, administrative aspirations, and teacher education possibilities. In-service training is a mainstay of the reading consultant's role. All of these ends include leadership functions with adults. The combined sessions offer a training and testing setting for aspiring workshop leaders to work with adults under supportive supervision by the instructor.

The combined sessions provide another valuable opportunity for experienced teachers. Working with adults in a leadership role integrates self evaluation into a decision process. Given the self knowledge gained from leading mini workshops, the experienced teacher is in a better position to decide if working with adults in a leadership capacity is really a feasible desirable personal goal. Many aspire to leadership. Studying and thinking about leadership differs from actually living the leadership role. It is only reasonable that

trying the role on for fit increases the capability of making a better career decision; better for the profession, better for the teachers and children served, and better for the individual making the decision.

Independent Sessions

The independent sessions provide time to deal with matters unique to each group. The pre-service students require specialized information about elementary school teaching of language arts and reading that is common knowledge to the experienced teachers. The experienced teachers require independent time to develop their unique focus. Extended encounters with reading evaluation techniques, reading test construction, reading curriculum problems, and depth probes into the nature of reading itself are required for the aspiring reading specialists. The independent sessions also provide a time for sharing within the smaller, more homogeneous group.

Conclusion

Though the combination concept is not new, it is also not prevalent. Most teacher-preparation institutions still run the initial language arts and reading courses before student teaching and independent of input other than the instructor and the library. Many plans include the combining concept and some are being implemented with varying degrees of success. Much of the value of the plan lies in the here and now. It can be implemented in many settings within

one quarter or semester without increasing economic outlay and with little restructuring of schedules. The major requirements are the existence of a graduate reading program and willingness of university personnel.